



Pre-mixed spirits favoured by binge-drink teens

Figures undermine industry denials

By JILL STARK

THE alcohol industry has long denied it but new figures prove that teenagers at high risk of injury or death through binge drinking prefer pre-mixed "alco-pops" over other drinks.

Previously unreleased Federal Government findings show that 14 to 19-year-olds who drink at dangerous levels choose spirits-based, ready-to-drink (RTD) stubbies or cans. Unpublished figures from the 2004 National Drug Household Survey show that the sweet drinks were favoured by almost 78 per cent of girls and 74 per cent of boys at risk of short-term harm.

While beer was nearly as popular as pre-mixed spirits with boys, girls overwhelmingly preferred them to beer and wine. Industry executives consistently claim that pre-mixed spirits are not preferred by high-risk, under-age drinkers. An industry insider recently told *The Age* that companies targeted young people by sweetening them to mask the taste of alcohol.

Community Alcohol Action Network director Geoff Munro said it was time the industry "faced its responsibilities".

"These figures prove that RTDs are consumed by the riskiest drinkers and pose an immediate threat to the health and wellbeing of teenagers around Australia," he said. "Some single cans contain almost three standard drinks, which means young people get drunk quickly. Thousands of teenagers are admitted to hospital after overdosing on alcohol each year. Some suffer permanent brain damage, and some die, yet the industry is increasing the strength of drinks favoured by the youngest binge drinkers."

The Distilled Spirits Industry Council maintains that a 36 per cent increase in sales of pre-mixed spirits in the past four years has not contributed to dangerous drinking among young people. A spokesman said the survey showed that teenagers who drank at dangerous levels for long-term harm preferred beer or regular spirits.

He said the short-term harm figures were open to interpretation because teenagers could list multiple products when asked what type of alcohol they usually drank. "It cannot be concluded which of the range of products consumed contributed most to the high-risk drinking."

Teenagers were asked how often they had drunk alcohol in the previous 12 months. Females were considered to be at risk of short-term harm, such as being injured or assaulted, blacking out, overdosing or dying, if they drank five to six standard drinks in one sitting.

Males were at risk if they drank seven to 10 drinks. More than seven drinks for females and more than 11 for males was considered high risk.

Younger people in risky or high-risk categories preferred pre-mixed spirits but such drinks were less popular among older drinkers. VicHealth chief executive Todd Harper said the results

showed the need for a ban on marketing pre-mixed spirits.

"These are the drinks that are causing harm in the short term to kids and it's quite a disturbing pattern that's emerging," he said.

"We seem to be seeing a race among the alcohol manufacturers to put more and more alcohol into these products. We're up to nearly 10 per cent in some of them, which is well above the alcohol levels we're seeing in beer. It's something that needs urgent attention."

WHAT THEY'RE DRINKING

Type of alcohol consumed by 14 to 19-year-olds at risky or high-risk levels for short-term harm.

MALE

Pre-mixed spirits in a can **73.8%**
Regular strength beer **72.1%**

Bottled spirits and
liqueurs **68.7%**
Pre-mixed spirits
in a bottle **43.6%**

FEMALE

Bottled spirits and liqueurs **77.6%**
Pre-mixed spirits in a bottle **77.6%**
Pre-mixed spirits in a can
71.8%
Regular strength
beer **29.7%**



SOURCE: NATIONAL DRUG HOUSEHOLD SURVEY 2004